

Central Intelligence Agency

25X1

DATE

3/12/86

DOC NO

EURM 86-20037

OCR

3

P&PD

1

1-file

1-SOURCED

Washington, D.C. 20505

10 March 1986

THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF THE MEDIA IN FRENCH POLITICS

Summary

The current election campaign in France has dramatically focused attention on two related developments -- the increased salience of public opinion and media politics, and a decline in traditional ideologies. There has been a noticeable trend in recent years toward American-style politics stressing public image as much as issues. President Mitterrand's active and effective use of television has markedly improved the Socialist Party's dim electoral prospects, while at the same time producing a spectacular rise in his own popularity. His short-term gains in partisan politics, however, may make a post-election accommodation with the right even more difficult. In the broader sense, though, Mitterrand's use of the media points up the degree to which the changing political environment is forcing politicians to revamp their styles to accommodate media politics. These changes may be hastening a generational shift in party leadership by enhancing the opportunities for a new generation of politicians who are more comfortable with media politics. Moreover, these stylistic changes may mirror a more profound change in the political environment, including the decline of ideologies and growing voter reluctance to make firm commitments to any particular party.

25X1

25X1

25X1

This memorandum was prepared by [] Office of European Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to [] Chief of the European Issues Division, []

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

Politics and Public Opinion

In the last decade there has been an accelerating tendency for French politics to import some of the factors that have transformed American politics -- media consultants, public opinion polls, presidential press conferences, and pre-election debates. Media consultants have become standard features of every campaign team. Jack Lang, Mitterrand's consultant in 1981, was even credited with winning the election by changing Mitterrand's dour image with stylish clothes and more "human" speeches. More recently, in response to falling ratings in the polls, Mitterrand went on a media offensive, installing a television studio in the presidential palace and initiating a series of press conferences and human-interest interviews. []

25X1

Other politicians are following suit, and this election season has seen an unprecedented competition for media exposure. Moreover, pre-election debates have become standard fare. Because the recognized "winner" of the 1974 and 1981 debates -- both between Giscard and Mitterrand -- went on to win the election, debates have acquired a predictive aura. An early turning point in the 1986 campaign was the Fabius-Chirac debate in October which produced a startling, though momentary, rise in Chirac's popularity. Fabius, previously the "fair-haired boy," suffered an equally startling decline from which he has yet to recover. []

25X1

We believe these changes in style are symptomatic of a broader phenomenon: the increasing role of public opinion in French politics. Heretofore, policymaking in the Fifth Republic has been fundamentally technocratic and therefore largely unaffected by the shifting currents of public opinion, but the policy process is being transformed by institutional changes within the regime, including:

- The resurgence of parliament as a policymaking institution.
- The politicization of the civil service.
- The evolution of modern political parties in place of the personalistic parties of the past.
- And most obviously, the end of one-party dominance. []

25X1

With the "imperial presidency" under siege and election results no longer a foregone conclusion, party (or coalition) leadership is increasingly tied to general popularity rather than simply to intraparty power. Giscard's claim to the leadership of the right has probably been fatally undermined by his consistently poor showing in the polls, and the battle between the other two contenders, Jacques Chirac and Raymond Barre, is being waged in large part on the field of public opinion. On the left, Mitterrand's personal and presidential authority was threatened by the deterioration of his performance

25X1

25X1

in the polls. Conversely, his phenomenal rise in public opinion -- from a 20-percent approval rating in the summer of 1985 to better than 50 percent in the latest poll -- has significantly strengthened his bargaining position in any postelection arrangement that forces him to "cohabit" with the center-right. []

25X1

Mitterrand's Media Blitz

Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from Mitterrand's experience is that television exposure works. His rise in popularity coincides almost exactly with his pre-electoral media blitz. Mitterrand has aggressively used television with a skill that has not been seen in France since De Gaulle. The austere, aloof image that plays rather badly in personal appearances becomes majestic on the television screen, and Mitterrand's allusions to national honor, presidential grandeur, intellectualism, and traditional values -- all right out of the Gaullist book -- strike a responsive chord. []

25X1

This media strategy is not without hazards. Normally, presidential appearances on television are infrequent and therefore inherently significant. Since late fall, however, Mitterrand has appeared in countless programs, openly stumping for a Socialist victory in the election. This high level of exposure, although successful in the short run, may turn out to be too much of a good thing, diminishing the impact of future presidential interventions and possibly stripping the presidency of an important mobilizing tool. []

25X1

There are short-run dangers as well. Mitterrand's level of partisan activity is without precedent for a president of the Fifth Republic and could still backfire. The president is by custom supposed to be a nonpartisan leader of the nation, not of a party. Although this ideal has never actually been met, the facade of impartiality has never been so clearly violated. If the Socialists do well in the election -- most would consider it a moral victory if the party remains France's largest with about 30 percent of the vote -- it will be widely viewed as a personal triumph for the president, but his open partisanship could make a postelection accommodation with the right even more difficult. If, on the other hand, the Socialists do badly despite Mitterrand's unusual efforts, the rebuff could tarnish his newly restored public image, precipitate another slide in the popularity polls, and perhaps even chip away at the prestige of the presidency itself. []

25X1

Generational Change and the Media

Challenges to the incumbent leadership of all parties are mounting from a younger generation which has matured during the age of television and is better able and more willing to exploit media politics. The rising stars on the left and the right -- for instance, Laurent Fabius and Francois Leotard, as well as the veteran Michel Rocard, the most popular politician in the country -- appear more sensitive to public opinion and willing to tailor

25X1

25X1

policy pronouncements to the latest poll data. Similarly, they more readily accept the growing impact of television and are willing to cater to the needs of a television strategy. The expected Socialist defeat in March will likely hasten the generational turnover within the party, but a similar transition looms ahead for the right as well. []

25X1

Changing Role for the Media

Until very recently, the printed press was so closely affiliated with political parties that it had only a limited role in setting the country's political agenda. Now that voters are beginning to loosen their ties to political parties, newspapers are being forced to redefine their role. Poll results indicate that between one-third and one-half of the electorate believes that ideological distinctions are no longer relevant. Just as the political parties are finding it difficult to attract and hold voters, newspapers aligned with those parties -- on both the left and the right -- are losing readers at an alarming rate. In an effort to survive, many papers are asserting their independence and experimenting with investigative journalism. Disclosures of the Rainbow Warrior scandal last summer -- culminating in the resignation of a cabinet minister -- demonstrated the growing strength of the press to influence the policy agenda. Likewise, the broadcast media's subservience to the government has been significantly diminished since 1982. Radio and especially television -- both now open to private enterprise -- have taken center stage in the political process. As these trends continue, we expect politics to revolve increasingly around personalities and images rather than issues and ideologies. []

25X1

We believe that the political role of the media will continue to expand in the coming years -- particularly if the opposition's promises to privatize state television are implemented. The government's considerable powers to prohibit or punish publication of unwanted information will slow the evolution somewhat, but we expect the trend to continue, with a more vigorous and activist media having a growing impact on the policymaking process. []

25X1

25X1

Distribution:

1 - Mr. Marten van Heuven, Department of State
1 - Mr. Peter Sommer, National Security Council
1 - Addressee
1 - DDI
1 - D/EURA
2 - EURA Production
4 - IMC/CB
1 - NIO/WE
1 - C/EURA/EI
1 - EURA/EI/PS
1 - PES
1 - D/ALA
1 - D/OCR
1 - D/OEA
1 - D/OGI
1 - D/OIA
1 - D/NESA
1 - D/SOVA
1 - D/OSWR
1 - D/CPAS
1 - Author
DDI/EURA/EI/PS/ (10Mar86)

25X1